

Effective President-Board Member Relations

Issue:

Trust is the cornerstone of effective presidential/board relations. James F. Jones, President of Connecticut's Trinity College, ranks his relationship with his board chair as second only to his wife: "I don't keep any issues from the chairman, even if they're problematic." While personalities, politics, or leadership styles can enhance or undermine relationships, well-defined roles and consistent rules for communication can prevent misunderstandings and reinforce a culture where members act according to the shared mission and vision of the university.

Best Practices:

- Manage communications among the university, the board, and the public. Typically, the board chair is the person designated to speak publicly on behalf of the board and communicates board issues to the president. The president acts as a liaison to the faculty and the state coordinating or governing board and works with the board chair to develop meeting agendas. Presidents should inform board members of potential problems early and often. Board members should maintain open dialogue among themselves and the president. Specific plans and procedures for managing crises should be established and communicated.
- Clearly delineate the roles of the board, the president, and other board members. The board should not manage the university but ensure that the university is well-managed. New board members should receive an orientation and ongoing professional development. A board member handbook should be distributed as a reference guide and updated periodically.
- Develop mutually agreed upon expectations and evaluate the president's performance yearly. Presidential evaluations are most effective when their primary purpose is to enhance performance. Feedback should be candid, constructive, and concrete, with opportunities for more regular, informal performance checks. Separate evaluations from contract or salary negotiations. Performance objectives should be negotiated and articulated well in advance of the evaluation. Boards should give new presidents a list of specific objectives to achieve within the first six months.
- Make time for board retreats and other strategic planning activities. Although time intensive, the value of these activities is the process itself, not the product. The act of agreeing upon goals and strategies builds consensus and gives board members a constructive way to air their differences. The process is especially valuable in times of change. Process improvement teams can be an effective way to promote open communications and shared decision-making.

Resources:

From the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges:

- Chait, Richard P., Thomas P. Holland, and Barbara E. Taylor. *The Effective Board of Trustees*. 1991.
- Ingram, Richard T. *Effective Trusteeship: A Guide for Board Members of Public (or Private) Colleges and Universities*. 1996.

Sources Consulted:

- Blumenstyk, Goldie, Paul Fain, and Sara Hebel. "Relations Between Presidents and Boards Top Agenda at Leadership Forum." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 23, 2006.
- Chait, Richard P. "How to Keep Trustees from Being Micromanagers." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 6, 2005.
- Iwanaga, John. "Presidents and Trustees in Partnership." ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, 1998.
- Miller, Hal M. "Trustee Relationships." Paper presented at the Association of Community College Trustees Southern/Northeast Region Seminar, Greensboro, NC, June 6-8, 1996.
- Nielson, Norm, and Wayne Newton. "Board-President Relations: A Foundation of Trust." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, vol. 97, issue 98, pp. 33-41.
- Strout, Erin. "The Trustees Tipping Point: When Does a Governing Board Say Enough is Enough and Fire the President?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 6, 2005.
- Weisman, Iris M. and George B. Vaughan, Eds. "Presidents and Trustees in Partnership: New Roles and Leadership Challenges." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, vol. 25, n. 2, summer 1997.